

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 2020/5781 – ***Avinu Malkeinu, the Infinite, the Eternal***

Nearly 2000 years ago, Rabbi Akiva fasted and prayed, imploring God to bring much needed rain for his community. He prayed these very words: “Avinu Malkeinu, Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us.” And rain immediately fell.<sup>1</sup>

We conclude the Avinu Malkeinu in our machzor with the words, *Avinu Malkeinu, choneinu vaaneinu; ki ein banu maasim. Aseh Imanu tz’dakah vachessed, v’hoshieinu. Avinu Malkeinu, Almighty and Merciful* – answer us with grace, for our deeds are wanting. Save us through acts of justice and love. We ask for healing, for compassion, for a year of goodness, we ask that our names be entered in the book of life.

*Avinu Malkeinu.* Our father, our king. What are we saying and singing? The melody is haunting and soothing, but in hearing the words, it offers a view of God that is both male as well as some version of father, and king, ruler, sovereign. These words bring images to mind, and for some of us that may work, and for others, these bring images that we cannot help but reject. I am not a fan of the notion of God as either father figure or a judging figure sitting king-like on a throne. This may have worked for Rabbi Akiva, but this needs a major reworking for me, and perhaps for you too. At the very least, I suggest that we may see Avinu Malkeinu as a metaphor.

We do want certain things, many things – healing, health, a good year, a good life, a long life, meaningful work, a just world, compassion, and yes, rain. But we often look out into the world and into our lives and find these things missing and our lives and our world still in need of healing. We look out into the world and see injustice, cruelty, intolerance, ignorance, hunger, and strife. Why, what is going on?

The Torah describes God as creator in the first chapter of Genesis. The first chapter is the plan, carried out with God’s speaking...let there be...and there was... like an architect’s plans laid out on the table...this goes here, that goes there...there’s the power and magnificence of God’s creation, but no conflict or drama.

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 25a

And then there's chapter two. God creates Adam, the first human being. He is male, and alone in the Garden of Eden. God puts the man to sleep, takes his rib or side, and from that builds the first woman. There's drama in this story...the tree of knowledge of good and evil is in the garden they are given to tend and to keep, and *of course* they eat from it. But this was not a 'sin' – yes, this was an action for which there were consequences – they got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. They have to work to survive. There will be pain in childbirth. They do have children, Cain, and Abel. There is sibling rivalry as they attempt to win God's favor. God takes note of Abel's offering and ignores Cain's offering. Abel wins. Cain is greatly disappointed and his face falls. God sees this and says to Cain, "Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master."<sup>2</sup>

In this 'conversation' between God and Cain, I am not happy with God. How in the world is Cain supposed to know how to have mastery over sin?

In my recent reading of *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets*, Nahum Ward-Lev offer a response:

Biblical readers have long judged God for favoring Abel, inciting Cain's fury. ... Cain's suffering grabs our attention and focuses it sharply on an issue that is at the root of so much human suffering. We humans need to be valued by those around us, especially our parents, while all too often someone else appears to stand in the way. Cain's fury also gives us insight into the complexity of the human condition. For even in the moment of rage, Cain must know that in murdering his brother, his own flesh and blood, something essential of himself will die as well. This is the painful dilemma that the people in Genesis repeatedly face: someone in the family appears to limit the favor or the blessing one receives. This dilemma arises from the perception that good things, including blessings from God, are scarce. Therefore, it appears that one must overcome another family member to receive those blessings. But displacing one's flesh and blood inevitably demeans oneself. At the root of this quandary lies the perception of scarcity. The arc of the narrative in Genesis illustrates that this perception of scarcity, rather than one's family member, must be overcome on the journey toward mutual relationship. In the first story of family rivalry

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 4:7

in Genesis, Cain perceived God's favor to be limited. God offered Cain a way out of his dilemma, informing Cain that he, too, can receive God's blessing. ... But Cain does not respond to God; he cannot hear God's offering. For Cain, there is only enough favor for one son. He suffers a sense of God's disfavor and is understandably enraged.<sup>3</sup>

In Pirkei Avot it says, "Reflect upon three things and you will never come to sin: Know from where you came, to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an accounting." (Avot 3:1)

Maimonides says: When a person contemplates from where he came, he will be moved to humility. When he contemplates his destiny, he will lose all concern for matters of this world.

How interesting: "concern for matters of this world." The Sages in Pirke Avot are concerned with the tangible and the intangible, the physical and the spiritual. They teach that what lasts is the intangible, what is truly important is the spiritual. When concern for matters of this world, the tangible and physical, are placed in a proper perspective, and the concern for the intangible and the spiritual raised, balance, and a life of goodness and holiness can begin to take shape.

Cain and Abel never had any of these teachings or distinctions. Cain wanted God's love, and approval, but thought he could never have it and so out of anger he killed his brother.

We work, strive and fight over things for survival, including food, water, and land. These are physical things in our world, and they are important. But Cain was not fighting over something scarce. Cain killed his brother over love, approval, and attention, which can never be measured. The bible brings us a story of the original case of fratricide, but unfortunately, not the last in our world. Perceived scarcity remains an issue, and its time we learn what is scarce and what is not. We are killing people over this.

Think about the things in life that are finite. We know they are finite because there is a limit to how much there is.

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<sup>3</sup> Ward-Lev, Nahum. The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets: Then and Now (Kindle Locations 1597-1609). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

Now consider that which is infinite. Love. Compassion. Connection. Caring.

When we distinguish what is scarce, and what is not, the tangible from the intangible, the physical from the spiritual, and finite from the infinite, and begin to see life through these lenses, we have access to distinguish and master the sin that crouches at our door. This requires awareness and discernment. In moments of stress, we should ask ourselves, what it is that I truly want, and ask, is what I want useful? Much of what we fight for is not scarce, but we mistakenly think it is. We can save a great deal of suffering hurt and strife when we examine what it is that we are suffering over.

Joseph was the favorite son of our patriarch Jacob. Jacob's favoritism of Joseph is illustrated in Genesis in all its destructiveness. In a fit of jealousy, his brothers sold Joseph to a traveling caravan and into slavery. Years later, working his way up from imprisonment and slavery, Joseph became viceroy to the king of Egypt. His position enabled him to help his family survive a widespread and lengthy famine, but his brothers never forgot what they had done to him years earlier. When their father died, they feared that finally, their brother would take his revenge upon them, and begged him for forgiveness and said they were prepared to be his slaves. But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result -- the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." <sup>4</sup>

In Joseph's world, there were limits – scarcity, famine, land, resources, and he was a master at managing them. True to his name, *Yosef* in Hebrew means “he increases,” and he distinguished further as well, between the finite and the infinite, and with his increased perspective, granted his brothers true freedom, forgiveness, freedom of spirit, and generosity.

There are limits in our physical, finite world, and they are real limits. But we are spiritual beings also, with yearnings toward the infinite and spiritual, which we often ignore, or put off later, or simply do not take the time to explore. Let us seek and examine these often-ignored yearnings, for our souls are calling us to look, to care, to pay attention, to seek justice and fairness, and the time is now.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 50:19-21

*Avinu Malkeinu*, we ask for healing, for compassion, for a year of goodness, we ask that our names be entered in the book of life. *Avinu Malkeinu, choneinu vaaneinu; ki ein banu maasim. Aseh Imanu tz'dakah vachessed, v'hoshieinu. Avinu Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful – answer us with grace, for our deeds are wanting. Save us through acts of justice and love.

This year, may we seek the infinite, intangible, and spiritual in our lives, even as we live in the world of the finite, tangible, and physical, as we are the nexus of these two worlds, these two worlds meet within us. In Proverbs it says “*Ner Adonai nishmat adam* - The soul of the human being is the candle of God.”<sup>5</sup> As a flame lights another flame and another and yet another, may we recognize that the divine light within each of us is infinite and eternal, and honor the divine light within all human beings as we begin this new year of 5781.

Shana tova tikateivu,

*Rabbi Lisa Bock*

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<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 20:27

## RH 5781 – The Illusion of Certainty, Waking Up

On Rosh HaShanah this is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die...who by fire and who by water...who by earthquake and who by plague...

There's a saying, "Nothing is certain in life except death and taxes."

There's also a Chasidic saying, "We plan and God laughs."

I think that the Unetaneh Tokef and our Shofar calls on Rosh Hashana are a combination of practices that pierce our hearts and makes us stand and shiver. But what do we remember, what do we take away from today? Are we changed? Are we taking something away that enriches our lives, encourages us to live our lives as better people, do we think of things differently? Or check the box and say I got it done.

High Holy Days are my favorite holidays. They call us to reflect, not just individually, but as a community, and do the work that has the potential to change our lives. It is a time of individual and communal *heshbon ha-nefesh*, accounting of the soul. We recognize our failings and our frailty as well as our power to change and make change. In a recent episode of the show *The Umbrella Academy*, one of the characters, Diego, says, "Everyone changes the world." When we really see that we have an impact in our world whether we realize it or not, whether we intend to or not, we realize the significance of our actions and inactions. At this time too, we come face to face with life and with death, and hopefully, make changes that in whatever time we have in our lives, to live better, fuller, more meaningful lives.

In the Torah portion that I chanted earlier, Abraham binds his son to the altar and is about to sacrifice him. Isaac faces death in that moment. What did he see? What did he think? We don't know, the text does not tell us. We do know that they descend the mountain separately, no conversation occurs between them. Isaac goes to Be'er Lahairoi in the Negev. Sarah dies. Abraham mourns.

But then we see that Abraham arranges for his servant to find a wife for Isaac, and as he brings Rebecca to Isaac, Isaac is meditating in the field toward evening,

and the servant tells Isaac of his father's instructions, and brought Rebecca to Isaac and she became his wife.

Before the near sacrifice of Isaac, Isaac had never left home, never married, very little is said of him. He is 37 when his mother dies. It is only now that his life seems to begin. The 16<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher once said, "A person who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave."

What does this teach us? What might Isaac have learned from his near-death experience? We can only wonder...If he was enslaved, what was it to? Was he overly devoted to his parents, reluctant to separate from his aging parents, staying to care for them? Was he afraid of setting out on his own, into his own life? He must have been terribly devoted to his father to allow Abraham to nearly sacrifice him. Awareness of his near-death experience woke Isaac up to the illusion of certainty. Freed of the illusion of certainty, he moved on to live his life and have a wife and family of his own.

Abraham, in the last minute, sacrificed a ram instead of Isaac. The shofar comes originally from the ram's horn, the ram that Abraham sacrificed instead of Isaac. The shofar itself, from a wild animal, the ram, is a symbol of uncertainty.

I love the shofar, and I also struggle with it. Each time I blow the shofar, I am nervous – will I do it right this time? Will my breath be enough? Will my lips vibrate in the correct manner to make the sounds? It is only in the act of lifting the shofar and blowing it do I know what will happen.

Living in certainty is an illusion. Even the ground which is so solid underneath us shakes from time to time. The sunrise has recently been shrouded in smoke, and even the air we breathe is not something we can take for granted. For some, simply running an errand to the store is a life changing event. A year ago I never thought I'd be going to the store wearing a mask, or that we would be gathering via zoom for the High Holy Days of 5781.

In the spring of 2014 Ken and I had the lovely experience of crossing the Atlantic on a cruise ship. We had a destination, a schedule of arrival, and as we set out, we spent a number of days seeing nothing but water all around. It was a strange experience, not seeing land for days. I wondered and reflected on the biblical story of Noah and his family aboard the ark – a very different vessel, and a very

different scenario. For Noah, all around was water, but an ark is not a ship, nor even a large boat, it was just a container, with no steering, all it could do was float. No destination, no arrival time, all they could do was wait, the future was uncertain. I wonder if they mourned for people they had known. And all the water surrounding them...its purpose was to drown life and prepare for humanity 2.0.

In the past months of 2020, I have no longer needed to wonder what it was like in the ark, waiting, wondering what would life be like when the water receded, and when. I, along with the rest of the world, have watched, feared, and grieved.

I have wondered what it must have been like in Great Britain, during the Blitz, living underground, and wondering when it would stop, who would survive, and what life would look like when the bombing stopped. I wonder if over time those sheltering underground got used to the bombs falling. Like the news, we hear impact after impact, and initially shocked, begin to get used to it. Or perhaps we just get too tired.

The ram's horn, the shofar, is meant for us to wake up. Like violent movies, we hear in the news reports of violence, and violent reprisals. We become inured to the point we do not or cannot hear it anymore, and it becomes mere noise.

Every life is precious. In the Mishnah in Sanhedrin it states that when one destroys a single life it is as though one has destroyed a whole world, and when one saves a single life it is as though one has saved the whole world.

I have often thought it unfair that in creating Adam before Chava/Eve, it seemed overly patriarchal. But when viewed through the notion that with the creation of a single human being from whom we are all descended, this teaches us that all 7.4 billion of us on this planet are family. When a single person dies due to violence at the hands of another, it is as though one has destroyed a whole world.

I am terribly uncomfortable with the notion of God flooding the whole world with rain so He can create humanity 2.0. I am even more uncomfortable with the notion of God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to prove his faith to God. I believe that our Torah brings to us stories that stir us up and demands us to examine these stories as they relate to life and our lives.

Traditionally on Rosh Hashana we read of the birth of Isaac followed by him playing with his half brother Ishmael, born of Hagar and Abraham. Sarah watches

and realizes that Ishmael is the son of “that woman Hagar” who will receive the first-born’s inheritance and demands that Abraham send both Hagar and Ishmael away. Sending them away is a death sentence. Abraham is anguished by this demand but does so. Hagar has already been treated abominably – as a maidservant, she was impregnated by Abraham at Sarah’s request, and then returned to enslavement afterwards. We are supposed to take issue with this! Our matriarchs and patriarchs were flawed human beings, and we are supposed to see them as such, and learn from their mistakes. In the next chapter is the near sacrifice of Isaac. In the span of two chapters Abraham’s sons are at the brink of death, and each are saved in the last moment by an angel. If this is a test of Abraham, he fails. His inaction to speak and argue for his sons’ welfare is his greatest failing. He is willing to follow God’s instruction over that of the most fundamental of Jewish values: the preciousness of life. He does not argue with God as he did for the potential righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah. He argues for them, but not for his sons, his family.

We are the people Israel, named for Abraham’s grandson Jacob who was named Israel by God when he struggled and wrestled with God and prevailed. He was blessed with this name, and we, the children of Israel take that name.

We are supposed to struggle with God, and that means that we must be awake enough to struggle and know what to struggle and fight for. We must wake up. When we lose the recognition of the preciousness of life, we lose our humanity. It is as though the horrifying scene of the sacrifice of Isaac is happening anew each time. When we treat those who do not look like us, worship as we do, or come from another country or group as ‘the other,’ we all lose our humanity. But when we all share the same rights of freedom, dignity, education, and opportunity, we bring healing and wholeness to our world.

I offer you now the prayer of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, whose words reflect my own:

Oh God of the spirit of all humanity, as we rise to listen to the sharp and penetrating sound of the shofar, may our hearts hearken to your call so that we may be able to arise from our spiritual and moral lethargy. Help us to cast off that paralyzing insensitivity which makes of our lives a series of tiny, meaningless moments, and which converts us into small people, with small hearts, living small lives, with small dreams. May the sharp and

trembling blasts of the shofar awaken our slumbering hearts, making them beat faster and pumping into our veins the life-giving blood of multi-dimensional awareness and creativity. Help us, O God, to understand the call of the shofar. Help us to sensitize our hearts and souls so as to achieve in the coming year a life more dedicated to noble goals. May the sound of the shofar reach into the hearts of all your children wherever they may be so that we may walk together toward an era of peace and harmony. Amen.

O people Israel! Harken to the broken notes of the *Shevarim*. Let us mend our tattered souls and broken lives so that we may serve God and the creation with the fullness of our being. May the weeping of the ram's horn invoke in us the willingness to sacrifice and labor for the dawn of a new world in which men and women of all creeds, colors, and races may live in justice and equality. Amen.

Humankind! Harken to the call of the shofar. Let us awaken from our apathy and egotism. Let us realize our capacities as beings created in the image of God with the power to create, to love, and to build.

Let us cast away our fears and anxieties, our suspicions, or aggressions, our hostility and violence. May these shofar blasts strengthen our decisions to lead more significant lives dedicated to the search for Your love and Your eternal truth. May we dedicate ourselves to the sanctification of all life. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Henry David Thoreau wrote: To be awake is to be alive. Only that day dawns to which we are awake.<sup>2</sup>

May the sound of the shofar and the meaning of this day awaken us and transform us, empowering us to face the uncertainty of life with courage, and to align our actions with our values so that we may live lives of goodness, compassion and truth.

Shana tovah umetukah, wishing you a good and a sweet new year of 5781.

Rabbi Lisa Bock

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<sup>1</sup> Shofar: Awaken our slumbering hearts, by Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, pg 177-178, in Rosh Hashanah Readings, ed. Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins

<sup>2</sup> Henry D. Thoreau (1817-1862)

## **Sermon: 5781 Erev Yom Kippur**

The professor walked up and down the aisles of the classroom, returning the midterm papers to each student, one by one, with a comment to each student as the paper was placed on their desk. The professor placed my paper on my desk, and said “hmm.” I opened the cover and my heart sank. The grade was not what I had expected. I worked so hard on it, what had I done? I knew business law was not quite my forte, but I was acing my other exams. I spoke to the professor after class and asked for help. He said to me, Lisa, you are a nice person, and you recognize what is fair and what is not, but you’re not applying the law to the cases. He took the time to explain what had been obvious to him, but completely foreign to me. I didn’t like what I heard, but I learned, and managed to ace the final and get a “B” in the class. More importantly, I learned a distinction between what seems fair in my kishkes, and what is law. Something may not seem fair intuitively, but law has to be applied to the case at hand, arguments must be made based on the case law. It was a difficult lesson in life to learn, and I knew I was never going to be a lawyer, but I have been fascinated with it, especially Jewish law, that is, our Talmud, and have been a student of Talmud, with a practice of regular study of Talmud for at least 15 years.

Our tradition is based on the recognition that we can fail at something, and we can redeem ourselves. Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden ate from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, and though it is often thought that was a sin, in our tradition, it was not. It was an action for which there were consequences, but it was not a sin. The action is what is wrong, not the person. I failed a test in business law, but I was not a failure. If we are truly living, we are going to make mistakes, other people are going to make mistakes. Sure, there are consequences, messes to clean up. Judaism teaches us that we make mistakes, and when we do, redemption is possible. But sometimes we add to the mess by placing blame – it wasn’t my fault, it was my parents, my teacher, that professor, that person...Even Adam blamed Eve for feeding him the fruit from the tree, and Eve blamed the snake. The consequence – they got kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

Blame is natural but not productive, and often, destructive. In his book *Factfulness*, Hans Rosling describes a personal experience with seeking to blame:

...when I was taking a shower in a hotel and turned the warm handle up to maximum. Nothing happened. Then, seconds later, I was being burned by scorching water. In those moments, I was furious with the plumber, and then the hotel manager, and then the person who might be running cold water next door. But no one was to blame. No one had intentionally caused me harm or been neglectful, except perhaps me, when I didn't have the patience to turn the warm handle more gradually. It seems that it comes very naturally for us to decide that when things go wrong, it must be because of some bad individual with bad intentions. We like to believe that things happen because someone wanted them to, that individuals have power and agency: otherwise, the world feels unpredictable, confusing, and frightening.<sup>1</sup>

When we blame others, we see the world through a loss of personal power, and we harbor all the feelings that result, including resentment, anger, fear, victimhood and anxiety.

We do not have to go far to think about the things that are causing anxiety in our world today. Virus, civil unrest, politics, environmental concerns, economic concerns, and we can add to this list quite easily.

Hans Rosling makes the point that when we seek to place blame, it has the effect of stopping our learning, and we have a limited understanding of the facts:

This instinct to find a guilty party derails our ability to develop a true, fact-based understanding of the world: it steals our focus as we obsess about someone to blame, then blocks our learning because once we have decided who to punch in the face we stop looking for explanations elsewhere. This undermines our ability to solve the problem, or prevent it from happening again, because we are stuck with oversimplistic finger pointing, which

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<sup>1</sup> Rosling, Hans. *Factfulness* (pp. 206-207). Flatiron Books. Kindle Edition.

distracts us from the more complex truth and prevents us from focusing our energy in the right places.<sup>2</sup>

The upshot of all this? Rosling teaches us that when something goes wrong we should not look for an individual or a group to blame. Accept that bad things can happen without anyone intending them to. Instead spend your energy on understanding the multiple interacting causes, or system, that created the situation.

In our tradition, we have a remarkable group of women who saw a system being formed, understood the inherent imbalance it was about to create, and intervened:

Verses in the Book of Numbers<sup>3</sup> describes a census taken of all males over the age of 20. As part of the list of the various clans, we read that “Zelophehad ... had no sons, only daughters.” As the census was concluded, God instructs Moses: “Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares.” “Among these” refers to the males listed in the census; hence, we can conclude that Zelophehad’s daughters were not counted in the census and therefore were not to receive any land as inheritance.

Then, the daughters of Zelophehad ... came forward. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. How daring! Women! Entering this space, the entrance of the Tent of Meeting – a male-centric place, with Moses, the priests, tribal leaders, and the place where the tablets of the Ark of the Covenant rest – a place of holiness and authority. These women dared approach!

And then, they spoke: “Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of Korah’s faction, which banded together against God but he died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen!”

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<sup>2</sup> Rosling, Hans. *Factfulness* (p. 207). Flatiron Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> The Book of Numbers, chapters 26 and 27.

The daughters of Zelophehad are smart women – they know the law, this law given at Mt. Sinai - they know the intention of what this law is designed to do – to continue the family name and inheritance of land. But they see its flaw too, as it does not consider the infrequent case of when a man dies without a son to inherit, and has only a daughter or daughters. Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah approach Moses with faith and confidence and support their claim with compelling arguments.

Moses hears them and tells them that he is unable to decide this himself as the Torah says, “Moses brought their case before God,” who responds by unequivocally supporting the sisters’ demand and even by promulgating a new and permanent law to secure inheritance for any daughters in such circumstances. Thus, the sisters’ claim leads to the law of inheritance’s being changed forever.

A key to the sisters’ success is their full awareness of God’s laws and the people’s history and story. They insist on change by engaging Israelite traditions effectively, something the rabbinic sages of the Talmud recognized and praised, describing the women as wise, astute interpreters, and pious. Rabbi Silvina Chemen comments in the Women’s Torah Commentary:

The achievement of Zelophehad’s daughters was a landmark in women’s rights regarding the inheritance of land, from those days up to now. In addition, however, the story of these five women offers a compelling lesson for all those who believe that their destiny is fixed or that divine justice has abandoned them. It encourages us to think differently— and provides a message of hope for all those faced with obstacles. Perhaps the most important legacy of Zelophehad’s daughters is their call to us to take hold of life with our own hands, to move from the place that the others have given us—or that we have decided to keep because we feel immobile—and to walk, even to the most holy center, to where nobody seems to be able to go.

After all, nothing is more sacred than life itself and the fight for what we believe is worthy. Thus, this parashah inspires us to discover that we too have the ability to know what is right for ourselves and what our rights ought to be. When we believe in our capacity to shape our history, to the point of

being able to change even a law that came from the Revelation at Sinai, then we pay a tribute to Zelophehad's daughters.<sup>4</sup>

The courage to recognize inequity and address it is still needed in our day. Doing so alleviates the helplessness of anxiety, as a corollary to anxiety is the feeling of a loss of control. When we have something that we can do, rather than blame, complain, and be upset, then we have some power. Rather than just feeling something is unfair, unjust, like my midterm paper in my business law 101 class, when we get in there and look at the system in place, ask questions, learn about it, then we have a place to stand and to take action from.

A giant of a human being passed on the Eve of Rosh Hashana. Diminutive in stature, and even a bit shy, her passion for justice, her intelligence, keen mind, she had the courage to move from the place that others had given us as women, and surmounted obstacle after obstacle, reaching the Supreme Court, and served her country for 27 years. I'd like to share with you the words of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, from an address she gave at the annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee in May 1995:

There is an age-old connection between Judaism and law. For centuries, rabbis and other Jewish scholars have studied, restudied, and ceaselessly interpreted the Talmud. These studies have produced a vast corpus of juridical writing. Jews have been called "the people of the book," reflecting their placement of learning first among cultural values.

The Jewish tradition prized the scholarship of judges and lawyers, and when anti-Semitic occupational restrictions were lifted, Jews were drawn to the learned professions of the countries in which they lived. In the United States, law became a bulwark against the kind of oppression Jews had endured in many lands and for countless generations. Jews in large numbers became lawyers, some eventually became judges, and the best of those jurists used the law to secure justice for others.

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<sup>4</sup> Essay, The Daughters of Zelophehad: Power and Uniqueness by Rabbi Silvina Chemen, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008).

Laws as protectors of the oppressed, the poor, the loner, is evident in the work of my Jewish predecessors on the Supreme Court. The Biblical command: “Justice, justice shalt thou pursue” is a strand that ties them together. I keep those words on the wall of my chambers, as an ever present reminder of what judges must do “that they may thrive.”

The late Supreme Court justice (and former American Jewish Committee present) Arthur Goldberg once said: “My concern for justice, for peace, for enlightenment, all stem from my heritage.” I am fortunate to be linked to that heritage.

Each time I visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, I am reminded that Hitler’s evil kingdom, his “Holocaust kingdom,” was a kingdom full of laws. Leading jurists from Germany’s highly educated legal community willingly assisted in drafting the laws of the Third Reich. After serving as draftsmen, those jurists shunned the human consequences of the new laws by retreating into a heartless professionalism. They were, by their accounts, simply serving and enforcing law and order.

We must learn from that dreadful past, and strive to ensure against its repetition. In bad times, in oppressive societies, our humanity should cause us to hold fast to our human decency, so that never, in the service of political leaders, will we administer laws that deny the humanity or the human dignity of others.

I am a judge born, raised, and proud of being a Jew. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish tradition. I hope, in my years on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, I will have the strength and courage to remain constant in the service of that demand.<sup>5</sup>

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg lived her life in service of something greater than herself. She did not blame, but rather, informed and educated on the facts, she

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<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, Sunday, January 14, 1996. (Adapted from Justice Ginsburg’s address to the Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee, May, 1995.)

applied her intellect and energy in service of this country and each of us has benefited from her service.

On this day of Yom Kippur, we are called to ask ourselves how am I living my life? We can make amends for our mistakes and our failures, and they do not define who we are. We do not need to seek others to blame. We can learn. With a willingness to hear voices whose opinions are different from ours, we can learn. We can then make our informed opinions, like Hillel who always articulated Shammai's opinion before his own, and then made his argument. And, like Justice Ginsburg, whose voice, even in dissent had a profound impact.

On this day of Yom Kippur, we can choose to become better people. We can rise above being who we have been and live our lives in service of something greater than ourselves. We have the obligation, especially today, to ask ourselves, how will we live? Will we grow in our humanity, in our compassion – will we hear the cry of the poor, of the oppressed, the lonely? Will we become better human beings, in our own homes, relationships, in our work?

On this day of Yom Kippur, may we remember that a companion to anxiety is the feeling of helplessness. May we remember that in the face of distress we naturally seek to blame. Instead let us examine open our minds to learning what is really happening, and seek what structures exist that have that happen. Let us educate ourselves what responses are appropriate and useful, and have the courage and wisdom to address them like the Daughters of Zelophehad and Justice Ginsburg.

On this day of Yom Kippur, may we be blessed with courage, with insight, and with a love of learning that we have inherited through the generations.

I wish to conclude with the following blessing from Alden Solovy:

God of Old,  
Guide me to wisdom and strength.  
Teach me to break free of the chains  
That I have wrapped around my own heart.  
Teach me to live a life of service to others,  
A life in celebration of Your gifts.  
Teach me to see myself through Your loving eyes,

So that I may return, rejoicing,  
To You  
And Your People.<sup>6</sup>

G'mar chatimah tovah, may you be well sealed in the Book of Life.

Rabbi Lisa Bock

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<sup>6</sup> *This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*, by Alden Solovy, pg 73.

**Yom Kippur 5781: Is mortality a gift? May we be blessed with holy curiosity.**

On Rosh HaShanah this is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die...who by fire and who by water...who by earthquake and who by plague...

I have a question: Is mortality a gift? A heavy question, I know. But consider, do we benefit from knowing that one day we will die?

I think so. All the same, I think that for most of us, we don't want, nor are we accustomed to face it.

A few years ago, after an appointment with an estate attorney, a large, thick manilla envelope arrived in the mail. I knew what it was. I placed it carefully on the corner of my desk. She had already filled everything out as per my instructions, and I just needed to review it and sign it. These papers that spelled out my end of life wishes sat on the corner of my desk for six months, seven, eight...almost a year. I eventually did sign them, but it was a humbling journey towards the moment when I finally pulled the pages out of the large manilla envelope. I reviewed each page, signed them, and cried. The knowing the necessity of what I needed to do was distinct from the emotion I experienced doing it.

The religious thinker Ernst Simon wrote, *"The true alternative lies in whether we shall live in resentful opposition to death or in gracious acceptance of its inevitability."*<sup>1</sup>

I think that in addition to resentful opposition to death, or gracious acceptance of its inevitability, one must add that many simply choose to deny death, ignore it for as long as possible, like the papers which sat on the corner of my desk. We may be able to ignore or deny death for a while, but in our Jewish tradition, we encounter Unetaneh Tokef each year, and as people we know die, as we experience a year such as 2020, the blinders come off and we are face to face with the reality that living includes death.

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<sup>1</sup> Kieval, *The High Holy Days*, 144.

But knowing this gives us pause to consider life differently than if we deny it. And so I ask my strange question again. Is mortality a gift?

On Ros Hashana I spoke about the near sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. Until the Akeidah, Isaac had never left home, never married, very little is said of him. It is only after his near death experience that he begins a life of his own.

Awareness of our mortality, gives us a sense of urgency - to live life fully.

In his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford University, co-founder of Apple Inc., Steve Jobs said:

When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: “If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you’ll most certainly be right.” It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?” And whenever the answer has been “No” for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.<sup>2</sup>

In his blog Wait But Why, Tim Urban also explores the gift of mortality:

Nothing clears fog like a deathbed, which is why it’s then that people can always see with more clarity what they should have done differently—I wish I had spent less time working; I wish I had communicated with my wife more; I wish I had traveled more; etc. The goal of personal growth should be to gain that deathbed clarity while your life is still happening so you can actually do something about it.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/14/jobs-061505/>

The way you do that is by developing as much wisdom as possible, as early as possible. To me, wisdom is the most important thing to work towards as a human. It's the big objective—the umbrella goal under which all other goals fall into place. I believe I have one and only one chance to live, and I want to do it in the most fulfilled and meaningful way possible—that's the best outcome for me, and I do a lot more good for the world that way. Wisdom gives people the insight to know what “fulfilled and meaningful” actually means and the courage to make the choices that will get them there.<sup>3</sup>

In August, I received a call from my best friend from college. Her 24-year-old step daughter had died. Unable to fly back east to be with my dear friend, we attended the memorial service on Zoom, and her friends had many touching things to say. One speaker related what she had taught him: Life is short and goes faster as you get older. So, make the most of each day. Live with gratitude, it's the best way to find happiness. Travel, be spontaneous, and do, see, and learn new things. Her life was short, but it was rich with experience, love, stories, and adventures. She left a legacy of love and a love of life.

A theory published in the *European Review*<sup>4</sup> confirms that there is a physical basis for the feeling that time passes faster as we get older. We can counter this sense of time going faster when we change our routine, and be willing to embrace spontaneity, to do, see and learn new things. Ken and I tried this out with spontaneous early morning hikes, and one morning we hiked up to the top of a set of nearby trails and watched the sun rise over our fog shrouded, sleeping neighborhood, and saw birds and flowers that we would not otherwise have seen.

I believe there is a deeper message for us today. The *Unetaneh tokef* concludes with the words: *Utshuvah, utfilah, utzadakah maavirin et roa hag'zeirah* - But through return to the right path, prayer, and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree.

We are instructed to do more than to live well and enjoy life.

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<sup>3</sup> Wait But Why by Tim Urban, <https://waitbutwhy.com/2014/10/religion-for-the-nonreligious.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-review/article/why-the-days-seem-shorter-as-we-get-older/2CB8EC9B0B30537230C7442B826E42F1>

Teshuvah means to return. Where am I supposed to return? I am return to the trust self I can be, find the divine light within myself, and allow it to shine. What does that really mean? All those moments of anger, embarrassment, doubt, jealousy, resentment, these are places we are to return from, and return to the better parts of ourselves, to character traits such as generosity, patience, giving, inclusiveness, and love.

When we do the work of teshuvah, returning, we make amends with those we have wronged, which includes those who may be around us, but also with ourselves and with God. We then may return - reconnect with humility to the awesomeness of creation and to life, to reflection and prayer, and see ourselves truly as partners of the divine in repairing our world, where we work for justice, tzedakah, work towards a more just world, a world that we pray, is better for our having lived in it. Tzedakah means justice; to understand this as charity is incorrect. Tzedakah means that we work towards justice and dignity for all, that we work to change laws that are unjust, so that all have opportunity. In righteous giving, we give of our money, time, and energy.

The gift of mortality can bring us face to face with dread, despair, and grief. But the message of the Unetaneh Tokef can also lead us to see life newly, appreciate the beauty of each day, and to change our lives to live in such a way as to live urgently, fully, righteously and generously, to work for justice, to live with greater awareness, and to align our values with our actions.

I wish for us today a different sort of gift: the gift of curiosity and awe, which I believe is on the path to happiness and awareness. Albert Einstein once wrote:

*One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.*<sup>5</sup>

We can bring our holy curiosity both in the outside world as well as our inner lives. In Pirke Avot, Hillel used to say:

אם אין אני לי. מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו אימתי?

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

*If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?*<sup>6</sup>

May Hillel's words give us pause to consider who we are, who we are in relation to all of life, to humanity and creation, and embrace the urgency of every moment. That in every moment lies the potential for us to transform our lives for the better.

May you be blessed with holy curiosity, immersed in the awe of life, and cherish each moment. May our hands be instruments of goodness, of mitzvot, and may our mouths speak words of truth, healing and peace. May our hearts know love, grace, and justice.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May you be well sealed in the Book of Life.

Rabbi Lisa Bock

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<sup>6</sup> Pirke Avot 1:14